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SUBJECT: U.S. WWII WEAPONS DEBRIS THREATENS PEACE IN BOUGAINVILLE

REF: PORT MORESBY 58

¶1. Summary: Papua New Guinea (PNG) has formally requested U.S. assistance to clean up unexploded World War II ordnance, live weapons, and ammunition still littering areas of Bougainville Island near the former U.S. base at Torokina, reported reftel. Political leaders there believe the continuing availability of U.S. arms threatens the consensual settlement reached among factions to the island's long-running independence dispute. An earlier UNDP cleanup program failed because it sought to "contain" rather than destroy certain weapons, which later found their way into the hands of warring factions. PNG has also requested UN and Australian cleanup assistance. The peace achieved in Bougainville will remain fragile at best until remaining WWII arms are permanently out of the picture. Cleanup would also assist efforts to promote tourism and agriculture in the poverty-stricken region. End summary.

U.S. WWII Arms and Ammunition Still Widely Available in Bougainville

¶2. Bougainville residents tell us that our old weapons and military equipment are available "everywhere" on the conflict-torn island of about 175,000 people, site of an important U.S. WWII base at Torokina. An Australian academic expert recently showed us a video revealing WWII mortars, guns and bullets for sale or in active use throughout the area. Residents tend to view themselves as "owners" of the contents of arms caches, adding to the difficulty of cleanup efforts. Bougainville Region President James Tanis told us recently that residents would continue to buy and sell arms unabated even if he made the practice illegal.

¶3. Indeed, war materiel has become an everyday buy-and-sell commodity for many on the poverty-stricken island, who use the profits to pay school fees and support their families. Sellers reuse old gun parts to make new weapons. They also sell old bombs to local fishers for dynamiting reefs which leads to a few fisherfolk dying or being maimed every year and causes irreversible environmental damage in this pristine area. Although airport security has been tightened recently it is insufficient to prevent shipping of WWII arms to Port Moresby for domestic and, potentially, for foreign sales. Residents continue to search for hidden caches of weapons. Local residents widely believe that departing American soldiers packed their old weapons in oil and buried them for possible future use.

Availability of Arms Threatens Fragile Peace

¶4. Although the long-running struggle for Bougainville independence formally ended with a 2001 peace agreement providing for establishment of an Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG), not all factions have gone through reconciliation; hostilities continue to simmer. President Tanis, a former leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, is leading efforts to strengthen peace and conduct reconciliation ceremonies, particularly with the Mekamui Defense Force, since he took office in January. He told us that WWII arms were dug up, rebuilt and used throughout the conflict. (Note: UN officials on Bougainville agree that some WWII weapons were used in the conflict but assert that most were new, either brought in from Solomon Islands or taken from the bodies of fallen PNG Defence Force officials or rebel fighters. End Note.)

¶5. Arms cleanup efforts since signing of the Peace Agreement have failed because they did not lead to destruction or removal of all weapons. Tanis told us ex-combatants and local police designated as "special constables" were armed during the period following the Peace Agreement, which did little to advance disarming of the population or commerce in arms.

¶6. A subsequent UN-sponsored program also fell short. UNDP representatives told the Ambassador during a March trip to Bougainville's capital Buka that the former UN program consisted of two stages, containment and destruction. Weapons were destroyed in only one area; in all other areas, they were "contained." Local warlords had access to the containment areas and, unfortunately, have not been above allowing local residents in. After the ABG was formed following the signing of the 2001 Peace Treaty, the UN turned the weapons disposal process over to the ABG. When Tanis served as Minister for Peace and Reconciliation (2004-2005) he worked on the issue, but little progress has occurred over the last four years.

Tanis Seeks a Permanent Peace, Disposal of All Arms

¶7. Over the last few months, President Tanis has met with all ex-combatants to further the reconciliation process. He has established a "gentleman's agreement" among the factions to work together. He believes that total disarmament will only be possible when all sources of weapons have been shut off or destroyed. He has had the courage to tell his cabinet that it is better to destroy weapons on the ground than to let them get into the hands of the people. His next step is to bring the factions together in a neutral location outside of Bougainville to agree on a reconciliation agreement, to include weapons removal and disposal.

¶8. President Tanis told the Ambassador that destruction of the old WWII weapons, (which could still fall into the hands of rebels), is a key to success of an agreement, with the buried arms in Torokina a major part of the program. He noted that his government would like to encourage fishing, tourism and oil palm cultivation in the Torokina area, but that the existence of unexploded ordnance makes plowing and digging hazardous. Although the U.S. is not the only source of old WWII weapons in Bougainville, we are widely identified as the source of such weapons in the popular mind. Prime Minister Somare sent us a formal request for assistance April 8, per reftel. President Tanis has also contacted the Government of Australia and the UN for assistance.

Action Request: U.S. Has an Important Role to Play

¶9. While no one could have foreseen that U.S. weapons from World War II would someday play a role in Bougainville's political turbulence, that is precisely what has happened. The same weapons that once helped us win a crucial victory have now become instruments of violence and unrest. President Tanis, a former insurgent himself, represents the region's best hope for reconciliation and a lasting peace. The U.S. is well liked and

respected in this part of the world and should cooperate and support President Tanis' efforts to bring lasting peace to Bougainville by cleaning up our remaining war debris. We recommend strongly that the Department and DOD send an inspection team to survey Torokina and consult with national and regional officials as soon as possible. Australia and the UN have told us that they are prepared to do their part and want to cooperate closely with us on these efforts. Embassy Port Moresby officials have travelled to Bougainville twice in the last year and stand prepared to support a U.S. survey team on the ground.

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